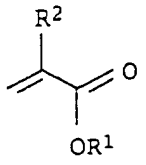
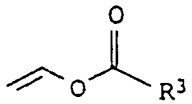
We claim:

1. A water-soluble or water-dispersible copolymer obtainable by free-radical polymerization of

a) 80 to 20% by weight of hydroxy-C_1-C_6-alkyl (meth)acrylate and, where appropriate, one or more compounds of the formula (A) or (B)



(A)



(B)

with R^1 = H, C_1-C_6-alkyl,
R^2 = H, CH_3
R^3 = C_1-C_{24}-alkyl

or mixtures thereof

in the presence of

b) 20 to 80% by weight of polyvinyl alcohol (PVA) and

c) where appropriate 0 to 20% by weight of other polymerizable compounds (C).

2. A water-soluble or water-dispersible copolymer as claimed in claim 1, wherein the free-radical polymerization is an emulsion polymerization.

3. A water-soluble or water-dispersible copolymer as claimed in either of claims 1 or 2, wherein hydroxyethyl methacrylate is employed as hydroxy-C_1-C_6-alkyl (meth)acrylate.

4. A water-soluble or water-dispersible copolymer as claimed in any of claims 1 to 3, wherein the compounds of the formula (A) are selected from the group of methyl methacrylate, methyl acrylate, methyl acrylate, or mixtures thereof.

5. A water-soluble or water-dispersible copolymer as claimed in any of claims 1 or 4, wherein the compounds of the formula (B) are selected from the group of C_3-C_{24} vinyl esters.

6. A process for preparing water-soluble or water-dispersible copolymers as claimed in any of claims 1 to 5 by free-radical polymerization in an aqueous or nonaqueous but water-miscible solvent or in mixed nonaqueous/aqueous solvents.

7. A process as claimed in claim 6, wherein the polymerization takes place in the presence of from 30 to 55% by weight of polyvinyl alcohol.

8. A pharmaceutical dosage form comprising at least one water-soluble or water-dispersible copolymer as claimed in any of claims 1 to 5 as coating agent, binder and/or film-forming excipient.

9. The use of water-soluble or water-dispersible copolymers as claimed in any of claims 1 to 5 as coating agent, binder and/or film/forming excipient in pharmaceutical dosage forms.